







## THE SIGN OF FOUR

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE was born in Edinburgh in 1859 and died in 1930. Into these years he crowded a variety of activity and creative work that earned him an international reputation and inspired the French to give him the epithet of 'the good giant'. He was educated at Stonyhurst and later studied medicine at Edinburgh University, where he became the surgeon's clerk to Professor Joseph Bell whose diagnostic methods provided the model for the science of deduction perfected by Sherlock Holmes.

He set up as a doctor at Southsea and it was while waiting for patients that he began to write. His growing success as an author enabled him to give up his practice and to turn his attention to other subjects. He was a passionate advocate of many causes, ranging from divorce law reform and a Channel tunnel to the issuing of steel helmets to soldiers and inflatable life jackets to sailors. He also campaigned to prove the innocence of individual and was instrumental in the introduction of the Court of Criminal Appeal. He was a volunteer physician in the Boer War and later in life became a convert to spiritualism.

As well as his Sherlock Holmes stories, Conan Doyle wrote a number of other works including historical romances, such as *The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard* (1896) and *Rodney Stone* (1896). In the science fiction tale *The Lost World* (1912), he created another famous character, Professor Challenger, who appears in several later stories.

Sherlock Holmes first appeared in *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887. The Holmes stories soon attracted such a following that Conan Doyle felt the character overshadowed his other work. In 'The Final Problem' (1893) Conan Doyle killed him off, but was obliged by public demand to restore the detective to life. Despite his ambivalence towards Holmes, he remains the character for which Conan Doyle is best known.

PETER ACKROYD was born in London in 1949 and was educated at Cambridge and Yale universities. He was literary editor of the *Spectator* for some years and for many years has been chief book reviewer for *The Times*. He is the author of *The Great Fire of London*; *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, winner of the Somerset Maugham Prize for 1984; *Hawksmoor*, winner of the Whitbread Award and *Guardian Fiction Prize* for 1985; *Chatterton*; *First Light*; *English Music*; *The House of Doctor Dee*; *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*; *Milton in America*

and *The Plato Papers*. His non-fiction work includes the biographies *T. S. Eliot*, which won the Whitbread and the Heinemann Award for 1984; *Dickens*, which was shortlisted for the Nobel Book Award for 1991; *Blake*; *The Life of Thomas More*, which won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize; and *London: The Biography. The Mystery of Charles Dickens*, his one-man play starring Simon Callow, had a successful run at two West End theatres during 2000. Many of his books are published by Penguin.

ED GLINERT was born in Dalston, London, and read Classical Hebrew at Manchester University. He recently edited *The Diary of a Nobody* by George and Weedon Grossmith, and has also annotated the collections of Sherlock Holmes stories, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, *The Valley of Fear* and *Selected Cases* and *A Study in Scarlet* for Penguin Classics. He is the author of *A Literary Guide to London* (Penguin, 2000) and is currently working on a new guide to London for Penguin.



ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

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# *The Sign of Four*

*Introduction by* PETER ACKROYD

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1

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# CONTENTS

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[Introduction](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[Chronology](#)

[\*The Sign of Four\*](#)

[Notes](#)

# INTRODUCTION

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*WARNING: In discussing this story, it has sometimes been unavoidable that crucial elements of the plot have been given away. Readers encountering this story for the first time, therefore, might prefer to read this Introduction afterwards.*

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle took no great pride in Sherlock Holmes; in the preface to his autobiography he relates his own achievements but finds no room for the detective or his adventures. Instead he concentrates upon his ‘thirty-six years’ study of the occult’, since for him spiritualism and its consequences were the true ‘three-pipe problem’. Yet the fact that Sherlock Holmes has been considered by many to be real, and that there have been many narratives of his life beyond the books themselves, is of course testimony to the power of Conan Doyle as well as to the credulity of certain of his readers. In truth, such a detective – such an intellect – ought to exist, if only to bring order to apparent chaos and to introduce meaning into the otherwise inchoate and meaningless.

*The Sign of Four* itself begins and closes with the cocaine bottle beside Holmes’s armchair, as if there were some unreal or unnatural element pressing upon the character of the detective. Yet in the second paragraph of the novel there are references to his ‘great powers... masterly manner... his many extraordinary qualities’ that somehow lift him above the conventions or expectations of the more ordinary inhabitants of central London. The accoutrements are familiar or at least became so after a ‘practice’ of some twenty-three years – the violin and the pipe, the shag tobacco and the needle – but in the ambience of Holmes himself they become transformed into objects rich and strange.

Holmes is in certain respects the quintessential late-romantic figure, one who can exist only within his own unique and exalted sphere – ‘I am the only one in the world’, he says of his profession at the beginning of this story – and who wishes fervently to transcend what he terms ‘the dull routine of existence’. We may even see him as an artist, then, concerned with the plangent and lachrymose poetry of crime and detection. It is revealed in *The Sign of Four* that he has written monographs ‘Upon the Distinction between the Ashes of the Various

Tobaccos, upon the proper identification of footsteps (with particular regard to plaster of Paris) and upon the influences of 'a trade upon the form of the hand'. This arcane lore rivals that of Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's novel, and Holmes's own somewhat arch observations recall or even rival the dialogues in that exactly contemporaneous book.

Both stories, also, are wreathed in the atmosphere of London. 'See how the yellow fog swirls down the street,' Holmes observes upon looking out of his window, 'and drifts around the dun-coloured houses.' In fact, the urban fog has become part of the mystery of the Holmes adventures; it represents the impenetrability of the city, its viscous materiality as well as its pallid obscurity. These in turn become the metaphors for those opaque and clandestine elements which Holmes, in the course of his activities, manages thoroughly to disperse. Objects lie open to his gaze so that a watch, for example, will give away the private and even furtive secrets of its owner. Holmes apologizes in advance since the time piece contains 'hardly any data' but then goes on to reveal that the owner 'was a man of untidy habits – very untidy and careless. He was left with good prospects, but he threw away his chances, lived for some time in poverty with occasional short intervals of prosperity, and finally, taking to drink, he died. That is all I can gather.' The curious and astounding revelation lies then in the further fact that he goes on precisely to describe the marks and lesions upon the watch which lead ineluctably to these conclusions. The world can be read and interpreted; the veils of fog can be lifted.

It remains a world of mud, however, with 'mud-coloured clouds' and 'muddy streets' like those of Charles Dickens at the beginning of *Bleak House*. It is a city of fitful illumination by gas and naphtha, where in the flickering light faces pass by as if in a procession of lost souls. It is a world of strange citizens, quixotic or malformed, and of odd out-of-the-way places like the bird-stuffer's abode by the water's edge in Lambeth where, according to Holmes, 'you will see a weasel holding a young rabbit in the window'. The mysterious Indian fort at Agra, invoked at the conclusion of this story 'swarming with fanatics and fierce devil-worshippers' also becomes a metaphor for London with its own 'winding passages' and 'long corridors'. The city then becomes a maze and a labyrinth, to which only the famous detective holds the thread; he 'muttered the names' of various dark and anonymous streets as he is driven through them in a four-wheeled cab, and retains his self-possession even when entrapped within 'the monster tentacles which the giant city' was throwing in every direction. Only Conan Doyle has managed to make the suburbs of the city seem so filled with threat, and

only Sherlock Holmes seems able to master it.

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In fact, Holmes will always be identified with the London of the 1880s and 1890s and has indeed become as much a part of its atmosphere as the fog, the gas-lamps and the twilight. The advent of Jack the Ripper, less than a year before *The Sign of Four* was written, may also be of some significance in this context; curiously enough the real murderer has assumed the mantle of fiction and of fable, just as Sherlock Holmes has been lent the carapace of reality, since in truth both are equal combatants in the strange somnambulistic and phantasmagoric world of the late Victorian city.

This is the context in which the spirited and sensitive young woman enters the lodgings of Baker Street at the beginning of this story, bearing all the marks of inward agitation as she confides to Watson and to Holmes that 'I can hardly imagine anything more strange, more utterly inexplicable, than the situation in which I find myself'. Here once more can be heard echoes of a romantic sensibility, of Keats's Isabella or of Tennyson's Mariana. In that spirit, too, Holmes may become a romantic hero who sets out to rescue the lady in distress, although all sexual and emotional associations are dispelled by his preoccupation with pure logic and with the play of mental operations. For him the appealing young woman is a 'mere unit, a factor in a problem'; you might say that for him she was simply one of the crowd, in a city where the forces of impersonality and anonymity were already assiduously at work.

This situation perhaps throws a further and more suggestive light upon the lodgings in Baker Street, which in certain significant respects represent a retreat or withdrawal from an increasingly threatening and urban alien world. London, in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, was indeed undergoing a bewildering process of growth and of transition. It was still the vast nineteenth-century megalopolis of poverty and vice, of beggary and prostitution; it was altogether a dark city, where the extremes of the human condition might be said to meet and part on equally threatening terms. But it was also the city of the underground railway and of the 'new woman', of socialism and of trade unionism. The lanes and alleys of an older London were still in evidence, and indeed play a part in this particular adventure, but the topography of a more closely controlled and imperial city was rising all around them. Old and new realities jostled against each other, so that the calm and dignified reserve of Baker Street acted as a barrier against an increasingly inchoate and puzzling world.

When a group of 'street Arabs' or 'Baker Street Irregulars' irrupt into the comfortable

interior, it is as if they too were savages from some distant Indian wilderness like the one memorialized in the novel. Those interested in the politics of the period might observe certain oblique or inadvertent observations here on the nature of colonialism. The central burden of the tale concerns spoils filched from the subcontinent, and it is possible that the imperial city itself has been tainted by the oppressive nature of imperialism; the master comes to resemble those who have been ostensibly mastered.

Some sections of the narrative are in fact set in what is described here as ‘the howling desert of South London’, where in an apparently suburban setting intimations of foreign mystery are introduced together with strange encounters and even stranger crimes. As if limning the contours of some pre-Raphaelite painting, Conan Doyle depicts a world of rich tapestries and fabulous jewels; there is a touch of the Gothic, too, in his rendition of the southern area with evocations of ‘gloom’, ‘deathly silence’ and that moment when ‘there sounded through the silent night the saddest and most pitiful of sounds’. In the general attention paid to the temperament and genius of the detective himself, very little consideration has been given to the quality of Conan Doyle’s prose which at its best has a melancholy intensity and majestic cadence which belong to the finest poetry of the period. It is also striated with rich local detail, so that he seems effortlessly able to evoke the marvellous and the terrible in the ordinary. As a descriptive writer Conan Doyle is in the same class as Robert Louis Stevenson, while his control of plot rivals comparison with H. G. Wells. He is a master of concision and the short sentence, also, so that the occasional divagation – on the twilight wonders of London, for example – emerges with all the more splendour.

This is as much to say that Conan Doyle was preoccupied with the procedures and rhythms of story-telling; like some Anglo Saxon bard he was concerned with the pace and speed of his narrative, omitting nothing, elaborating upon nothing. In that respect, also, he resembles his memorable creation. This in fact is one aspect of the pleasure to be derived from these adventures; their brevity and compression are such that the reader becomes like Sherlock Holmes, too, scrutinizing each page with attention and speed.

A brief biography of the author will perhaps be apposite here. He was born in Edinburgh in 1859; he was of poor but genteel parents, but he became a rough boy in a rough neighbourhood. Yet something propelled him towards books, and he soon turned into a voracious reader. Even while at school, he noticed in himself ‘some literary streak’.

Nevertheless, a 'streak' in itself butters no bread, and he enrolled at Edinburgh University to become a doctor. He studied botany, chemistry, anatomy and physiology, which in time bore as much fruit in the Holmes stories as in the more conventional practice of medicine. One of his instructors is supposed to have inadvertently acted as a model for the great detective himself, although such is the strength of Holmes's character that it must have been inspired by the inward temperament of Conan Doyle himself.

While working as a doctor in Portsmouth he began contributing stories to various magazines, with some success; he also became enamoured of spiritualism and mesmerism, as if his lapsed Catholicism needed some other soulful expression. He began reading detective stories, too, and noted their many weaknesses of plot and device; one of his few inspirations in that form was Edgar Allen Poe, and in particular the figure of the French theoretician M. C. Auguste Dupin whom Poe had created; *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, which may claim some distant relation to *The Sign of Four*, begins with the observation that: 'The mental features discoursed of as the analytical are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only in their effects.' Conan Doyle decided to rectify this omission. His new character was at first called Sherrinford Holmes, with an amanuensis known as Ormond Sacker. The names were eventually changed.

Conan Doyle's first story incorporating Holmes and Watson, *A Study in Scarlet*, was turned down by several publishers before being accepted in 1886 by Ward, Lock & Company. *The Sign of Four* followed, having been brought to life at a lunch on 30 August 1889 given by the proprietor of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*; Oscar Wilde also attended on that occasion, and during the course of the proceedings both men were commissioned to write appropriate stories for that journal. Conan Doyle recalled later that 'Wilde's contribution was *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a book which is surely upon a high moral plane, while I wrote *The Sign of Four*'. It is not at all clear that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is on a higher 'plane' than Conan Doyle's contribution, but surely there can have been few more productive and influential meals in the late nineteenth century. Conan Doyle was to be paid £100 for forty thousand words, and he promptly obliged; the tale was published in the February of the following year proving that professionalism was also one of his virtues. Wilde later complimented Conan Doyle in what the Scottish author considered to be 'too generous terms', but no doubt Wilde recognized that his associate had the requisite gifts of expression as well as construction.

In fact, the creation of *The Sign of Four* acted as a kind of catalyst in the creation of

Sherlock Holmes himself; soon after he completed it Conan Doyle began 'A Scandal in Bohemia', 'The Red-Headed League', 'The Boscombe Valley Mystery', 'The Five Orange Pips' and 'The Man With The Twisted Lip'. Twelve stories in all were composed in rapid succession, all for the *Strand* magazine; it can truly be said that a new phase in literature had been introduced, and that a character had begun a pilgrimage through the English imagination which would never end.

Yet there came a time when Conan Doyle grew tired of Holmes, and of being identified with what he called 'a lower stratum of literary achievement'. Indeed, he believed that his success as a writer of detective fiction had actively impaired his reputation as a serious novelist. As far as he was concerned the adventures of Holmes contrasted most unfavourably with his historical novels such as *The White Company* and *Sir Nigel*. It is a subject of some interest and wonder that a man could thoroughly misunderstand his own genius, and that he should be able to compose lightly and without undue effort works which have subsequently attained a kind of immortality. Their very popularity may have predisposed him against them; the fact that he could compose them easily may have led him to consider them somehow flawed or worthless.

Whatever the cause, he determined to kill off Sherlock Holmes in the falls of Reichenbach, in Switzerland; after his published demise men wore black crepe bands, and the author himself received letters variously inconsolable and threatening. Not since the death of Little Nell, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, had there been such a pronounced public reaction. It is a terrible thing to create a new form of man, as the Jewish theorists of the golem understand, because once propelled into life and being it cannot be stopped. Here of course Conan Doyle's interest in spiritualism might have afforded him a clue; the body may wither but the spirit or breath of life never dies. The curious consequence, too, was that the more incredulous wrote to Conan Doyle himself in order to ask his advice about hitherto insoluble crimes; in the popular imagination he had taken on the characteristics of his creation.

And of course Sherlock Holmes could not die; he returned miraculously to life, and in fact the final collection of Holmes stories, *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes*, was not published until 1927 when the author himself had reached his late sixties. Some of his energy seems to have failed him, but the inspiration was still there. One of the last adventures ends with an encomium to a 'career which has now outlived its shadows and promises to end in an honoured old age'. It is hard to contemplate the detective in old age, however, and indeed h

remains forever preternaturally alert and acute.

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There is much in *The Sign of Four* itself which bears the marks of Conan Doyle's continuing inspiration. Here, for example, is to be found that famous maxim which animates much of Holmes's investigative work – '... when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth'. Here too are revealed his techniques of close observation, and his ability to recite the true facts of the matter in as prescriptive and bland manner as a coroner in the process of examining a body.

There are various fugitive associations in the story. It has been suggested that Major Bartholomew Sholto is loosely based upon Oscar Wilde, but it is only supposition. The atmosphere of India and the Andaman Islands, which plays so large part in the denouement of the tale, is taken from the ambience of Africa which Conan Doyle visited as a ship's surgeon. Sierra Leone was, for example, described by him as 'a truly dreadful place', and in *The Sign of Four* India is in turn evoked as a 'perfect hell'. There are one or two casual or inadvertent mistakes. Conan Doyle's grasp of urban topography is not altogether assured, but in a narrative where the city becomes a veritable labyrinth the occasional blind turn is of no consequence. It is perhaps odd that the Sikh characters are given Islamic names but, once again, the general atmosphere of alienation and foreignness is of greater significance. It may also be of some interest to the scholar of Holmes adventures that this is the only story in which the detective shoots successfully at a suspect – on this occasion the dwarfish native whose skill with a blow pipe has already proven fatal.

Yet there is something else about the detective, going beyond the familiar repertoire of the lens, the tape-measure, and the revolver. He possesses a haunted or obsessive quality which might veer towards the darkness as well as towards the light. The perfect foil then becomes Watson, who is characterized by formidable common sense and pragmatism; a critic with predispositions towards literary psychology might even suggest that these are two aspects of Conan Doyle himself, vying for mastery on the printed page. Certainly his combination of robust patriotism and attenuated spiritualism suggests a certain Jekyll and Hyde quality – to use a metaphor from the period – which could only find expression in the Holmes and Watson duality. Thus Watson suggests of his companion, 'I could not but think what a terrible criminal he would have made had he turned his energy and sagacity against the law.' Holmes is in that sense a worrying presence, somehow beyond good and evil. His mastery of disguise and his theatrical genius, are also significant in this context: he is a Proteus who can assume



any part to the consternation and bewilderment of those who know him best. There is something unnatural, or preternatural, about Holmes's ability to alter his appearance and identity at will. He becomes in that sense fundamentally unknowable. That is where his strangeness, and his unique appeal, reside.

Of course the conditions of London itself may account for his behaviour. In the 1880s and 1890s it was in many respects a theatrical city, the size and anonymity of which forced its inhabitants to play a part and adopt a costume in order to register their status or identity. How can anyone expect to deal with, or master, the city except on its own terms? It was characterized by its artificiality and by the almost dramatic quality of its contrasts: it is significant that Sherlock Holmes always assumes a 'lower class' identity to pursue his theatrical vocation. T. S. Eliot, in fact, considered Holmes himself to be a thoroughly dramatic creation, a truth amply confirmed by the number of adaptations upon the stage as well as upon the screens of television and cinema. Not a single year has passed since Conan Doyle's death when a version of the great detective has not been performed somewhere or other in the world, and in his most recent incarnations he has been invested with a memorable bravura and theatricality.

There are of course more conventional elements within the tale, not least the narrative of the romantic affection between Dr Watson and the wronged Miss Morstan, but even this somewhat sentimental episode – without which no late nineteenth-century novel would be complete – acts as one of the sharper contrasts in a narrative which is striated by difference and division. When Watson glimpses the young lady enshrined in a half-open door (another pre-Raphaelite touch) he feels the strange contrast, for example, between 'that passing glimpse of a tranquil English home' and 'the wild dark business' which threatens to envelop them all. It has already been suggested that Victorian culture was quintessentially that of contrast, where a street of riches could lead to an alley of despair, and Conan Doyle is one of its most interesting exponents.

There are important forces at work, too, in such disparities. The spectacle of workers leaving the London docks at twilight, 'dirty looking rascals', prompts Holmes to remark that each one contains 'some little immortal spark'. Strains of immortality, and eternity, can be found even within a detective adventure. Conan Doyle quotes from Goethe, and from the German dramatist Jean Paul, to the effect that 'the great elemental forces of Nature' effectively dwarf even the most frantic or significant human business. It will also come as a

salutary reminder, to those who persist in believing that Conan Doyle was a 'mere' detective writer, that the author has deliberately introduced references to German Romanticism within a fable of terror and adventure as a way of suggesting the great connectiveness of literature.

Much of the concluding and conclusive action of the story takes place on that stretch of water where nature and industrial civilization meet in a forced and unhappy embrace – the River Thames itself, described here as a 'perfect labyrinth' like the city which it invades, is at the heart of the mystery of the book. A boat disappears somewhere within its bounds and the street Arabs or little savages of the city are hired by Holmes because they are the only ones who can penetrate the river's crumbling recesses and mysterious stairways. They are, as it were, the urban version of the little Andaman savage at whom Holmes shoots in the final pursuit. That great chase at the end of the story is fully appropriate to the Thames's reputation in the late nineteenth century as the river of darkness; when beside Barking Level and Plumstead Marsh the wooden-legged man and the deformed native shriek curses at Holmes and Watson, the whole scene becomes worthy of one of Doré's engravings in chiaroscuro. When the treasure is then consigned to the depths of the water, it is perhaps in inadvertent homage to the ancient spirit of the river which needed offerings as well as veneration and propitiation.

*The Sign of Four* as a whole is perhaps best described by one of its protagonists – 'It is a romance!' with an 'injured lady, half a million in treasure, a black cannibal and a wooden-legged ruffian'. It is a romance indeed, but one implicated in all the subtleties and transitions of late nineteenth-century London, as well as the currents of contemporary thought and speculation. It is a romance in which the rationalist or scientific temper is confronted by fabulous or monstrous events, and in which the great heart of the imperial city is disturbed by savage desires. As Holmes exclaims, in one of those rare moments of pure exhilaration, 'Isn't it gorgeous!'

## FURTHER READING

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Booth, Martin, *The Doctor, the Detective and Arthur Conan Doyle* (1997)

Coren, Michael, *Conan Doyle* (1995)

Dudley Edwards, Owen, *The Quest for Sherlock Holmes* (1983)

Green, Richard Lancelyn and Gibson, John Michael, *A Bibliography of Arthur Conan Doyle* (2000)

Higham, Charles, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1976)

Stashower, Daniel, *The Teller of Tales: The Life of Arthur Conan Doyle* (2000)

Symons, Julian, *Portrait of an Artist: Conan Doyle* (1979)

Weller, Philip and Roden, Christopher, *The Life and Times of Sherlock Holmes* (1992)

# CHRONOLOGY

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A chronology of Arthur Conan Doyle's life and work is likely to be skeletal. As a highly professional writer, a medical specialist, a public campaigner against injustice, a would-be politician, as well as a sportsman, spiritualist, and well-meaning amateur in fields ranging from skiing to weaponry, he threw himself with generous energy into a variety of lives, any one of which would have satisfied most people. A brief account of his activities can, at best, only suggest the range of an extraordinary life.

1859 Arthur Conan Doyle born at 11 Picardy Place, Edinburgh, on 22 May, second of ten children of Charles Doyle, a civil servant, and Mary Doyle, née Foley. (This year also saw the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*.)

1868–  
70 Spends two years at Hodder Preparatory School, Lancashire.

1870–  
75 Spends five years in secondary education at Stonyhurst, the leading Jesuit school, in Lancashire.

1875–  
6 Attends Jesuit college at Feldkirch, Austria.

1876 Enters Edinburgh University to study medicine. Taught by Joseph Bell, a surgeon at the Edinburgh Infirmary, on whom he later bases some of Sherlock Holmes's powers of detection.

1878 Begins first job, assisting a Dr Richardson in Sheffield. Stays with relatives in Maiden Vale, London, his first visit to the capital. Writes novel, *The Narrative of John Smith*, which is lost in the post and never recovered. Works as assistant in doctor's practice in Ruyton-of-the-eleven-towns, Shropshire, and then in Birmingham.

- 1879 ~~Publication of first story, 'The Mystery of Sasassa Valley', in the Edinburgh weekly~~  
*Chambers's Journal* (September).
- 1880 Serves as ship's doctor on Greenland whaler the *Hope*.
- 1881 Serves as ship's doctor on West African cargo steamer the *Mayumba*. Graduates from  
Edinburgh as Bachelor of Medicine.
- 1882–  
90 Establishes solo general medical practice in Southsea, a suburb of Portsmouth, after  
brief and unsuccessful partnership with Dr George Turnavine Budd in Plymouth  
(1882).
- 1884 Publication in the *Cornhill* magazine of 'J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement', widely taken  
as a true explanation of the mystery of the *Marie Celeste*.
- 1885 Marries Louise Hawkins. Obtains a doctorate from Edinburgh for dissertation on  
syphilis.
- 1886 Writes *A Study in Scarlet*, the first Sherlock Holmes story, which is rejected by the  
*Cornhill* magazine and the publishers Arrowsmith but is accepted by Ward Lock who  
hold it over for a year before publishing.
- 1887 *A Study in Scarlet* is published in *Beeton's Christmas Annual*.
- 1889 Birth of first child, Mary Louise. *Micah Clarke*, Conan Doyle's first historical novel, is  
published. At a meeting arranged by the magazine publishers Lippincott, Conan Doyle  
is commissioned to write what becomes *The Sign of Four*, the second Sherlock Holmes  
story.
- 1890 Publication of *The Firm of Girdlestone*. *The Sign of Four* published in *Lippincott's*  
magazine. Leaves for Austria to study ophthalmology in Vienna.
- 1891 Opens short-lived oculist practice in Marylebone, London, half a mile east of Baker  
Street. First six Holmes short stories published in the *Strand* magazine. Abandons  
medical career and moves to Norwood, south-east London, to take up writing full-time.

- 1892 Birth of Kingsley Conan Doyle. *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* collection of short stories published.
- 1893 Louise diagnosed with tuberculosis. More Sherlock Holmes short stories published in the *Strand* and later collected as *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*. In one of these, 'The Final Problem', Conan Doyle apparently kills off Holmes at the Reichenbach Falls. His father, Charles Doyle, dies in the same year. *The Refugees* published.
- 1894 Makes a very successful US lecture tour with his brother Innes. Publication of *Round the Red Lamp*, a collection of medical stories.
- 1896 Publication of *The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard* and *Rodney Stone*. *The Field Bazaar*, Conan Doyle Holmes pastiche and the first new Holmes work since the detective's 'death', is published in an Edinburgh University student magazine. Moves to Hindhead Surrey.
- 1897 Publication of *Uncle Bernac*. Meets and falls in love with Jean Leckie.
- 1898 Publication of *The Tragedy of the Korosko* and *Songs of Action*.
- 1900 Serves as a volunteer doctor in South Africa during the Boer War and produces an account of the struggle in *The Great Boer War*. Stands (unsuccessfully) as Liberal Unionist candidate for Edinburgh constituency.
- 1901 *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, set before Holmes's 'official' death in 'The Final Problem', begins publication in the *Strand*.
- 1902 Receives knighthood. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* published in book form.
- 1903 Publication of *The Adventures of Gerard*. Holmes properly resurrected in 'The Empty House', published in the *Strand*.
- 1905 *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, the latest collection of Holmes short stories that began

with 'The Empty House', published in book form.

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- 1906 Stands (unsuccessfully) as Unionist candidate for Hawick on the Scottish Border.  
Publication of *Sir Nigel*. Death of Louise Conan Doyle.
- 1907 Marries Jean Leckie. Publication of *Through the Magic Door*.  
  
Publication of *Round the Fire Stories*. Moves to Crowborough, Sussex. A new Holmes
- 1908 short story, 'The Singular Experience of Mr John Scott Eccles', later renamed 'The  
Adventure of Wisteria Lodge', published in the *Strand*.
- Joins with journalist E. D. Morel (model for Ned Malone in *The Lost World*) to
- 1909 campaign against brutality of the Belgian Congo regime, and writes *The Crime of the  
Congo*. Birth of son Denis.
- 1910 Birth of Adrian. Holmes play, *The Speckled Band*, opens at the Adelphi, London.  
Holmes short story 'The Devil's Foot' published in the *Strand*.
- Holmes short stories 'The Red Circle' and 'The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax'
- 1911 published in the *Strand*. Conan Doyle is converted to Irish Home Rule by Sir Roger  
Casement.
- 1912 *The Lost World*, now the most famous of Doyle's non-Holmes stories, begins  
serialization in the *Strand* and is published in book form in October. Birth of Jean.
- 1913 Publication of *The Poison Belt*. Holmes short story 'The Dying Detective' published in  
the *Strand*.
- 1914 Conan Doyle forms volunteer force on outbreak of the First World War. Holmes story  
*The Valley of Fear* begins serialization in the *Strand*.
- 1915 Publication of *The Valley of Fear* in book form.
- Conan Doyle makes first of several visits to the front line areas and produces a
- 1916 account of the British campaign in France. Joins unsuccessful movement to reprieve

Irish patriot Sir Roger Casement from execution for treason following the Easter Rising in Dublin (Lord John Roxton in *The Lost World* is partly based on Casement).

‘His Last Bow’, subtitled ‘The War Service of Sherlock Holmes’, published in the 1917 *Strand*. The recent Holmes short stories collected as *His Last Bow* and published in book form.

Death of eldest son Kingsley from pneumonia after being wounded at the Somme. 1918 Conan Doyle publishes his first book on spiritualism, *The New Revelation*; begins new career as an ardent global campaigner for spiritualism.

1919 Death of younger brother Innes from pneumonia.

1921–  
7 New Holmes short stories published in the *Strand*.

1921 Death of Conan Doyle’s mother, Mary Foley.

1924 Autobiography, *Memories and Adventures*, published.

1926 Publication of third Professor Challenger story, *The Land of Mist* (narrative with spiritualist theme).

1927 Recent short stories collected in book form as *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes*, the last volume of Holmes stories published.

1929 Appearance of the final Professor Challenger story, ‘When the World Screamed’, in *The Maracot Deep and Other Stories*.

1930 Arthur Conan Doyle dies on 7 July at home in Crowborough.



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